The Location of the Ghost Town of Avoca Village

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The story of the ghost town of Avoca began with the arrival of the William McDowell family in 1832. In that era, "good land" had to have timber and be next to a creek or river. The North Branch of the Vermilion River ran west from the Piper City area and met with the South Branch about five miles north of Fairbury. The South Branch flowed northwest from Oliver's Grove, three miles south of Chatsworth, and combined with Indian Creek, where Fugate Woods is now located.

The McDowells chose to locate on the South Fork of the Vermilion River about a mile south of where it meets the North Fork. The 1838 surveyor's map of Avoca Township shows large timber areas along the South Fork of the Vermilion River.

William McDowell established the Avoca Cemetery across the creek from the village of Avoca. Susan Philips was the first person buried in this cemetery in 1833. Unfortunately, William McDowell died in 1834 at the age of 48. Mr. McDowell was buried in the Avoca Cemetery.

The 1878 Livingston County history book by LeBaron recounted the first post office was established in 1840 and was called Avoca. Nicholas Hefner was the first Postmaster. The petition to obtain this post office was prepared by Abraham Beard, a schoolmaster in the neighborhood. This petition should have been mailed to the United States Postmaster General. Mr. Beard improperly prepared the petition and addressed it to the "Speaker of the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Illinois." Many pioneer settlers who signed the petition did not find the mistake when they signed the document because they were illiterate and signed the petition with an X. Once the post office was approved for Avoca, it fell between the post office route between Danville and Ottawa.

In 1854, Judge Woodford G. McDowell, son of William McDowell, laid out the village of Avoca. Judge McDowell owned the land the new town was located on. Amos Edwards, the Livingston County Surveyor, surveyed the village. The village of Avoca was located just east and south of where the Ocoya Blacktop now intersects First Street from Fairbury.

The 1893 Atlas of Livingston County contains a street map of the village of Avoca. There were two east-west streets named Bluff and Clark Streets. There were two north-south streets named State and Main Streets. Some land was allocated for a public square in the center of the village.

The oldest known map of the Fairbury area showing roads is the 1876 map of Livingston County from the Atlas of the State of Illinois by the Union Atlas Co. This map shows the location of the village of Avoca. The roads in 1876 were significantly different than

today's roads. In 1876, a road ran on the west side of the South Branch of the Vermilion River. There was also no First Street running north from Fairbury.

Once the village of Avoca was established in 1854, it soon became a thriving community. Three of the McDowell brothers opened a general store with the post office. They also set up a steam-powered sawmill with stones for grinding corn into meal. Several other stores followed, including a shingle mill, blacksmith shop, hotel, and schoolhouse. The McDowell family was Methodist. They built the "Pioneer Church" in 1856. It was a wood-framed building that was 32 by 50 feet with a sixteen-foot high ceiling.

In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad ran its new tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana border. Caleb Patton convinced Octave Chanute, the railroad engineer, to run the railroad tracks through his farm by offering the railroad half of the new city lots. Fairbury was formed as a new town.

Citizens of the village of Avoca quickly realized the new railroad and the establishment of Fairbury spelled the end of their town. Citizens started moving their houses from Avoca to Fairbury and McDowell. In her Stuffed Clubs & Antimaccassars book, Alma Lewis James recounted that the rear portion of the house at 110 West Maple Street was hauled to Fairbury from Avoca. The front part of the house was added in 1869 to the rear portion that came from Avoca. Many years ago, the Abe Filley family lived in this home in Fairbury.

Around 1859, Judge McDowell started the town of Fairbury, Nebraska. He named this new Nebraska town after his hometown of Fairbury, Illinois. Judge McDowell moved the steam-powered sawmill from Avoca to the new town of Fairbury, Nebraska. It was used to mill lumber to build Fairbury, Nebraska. In 1872, the Avoca post office was discontinued.

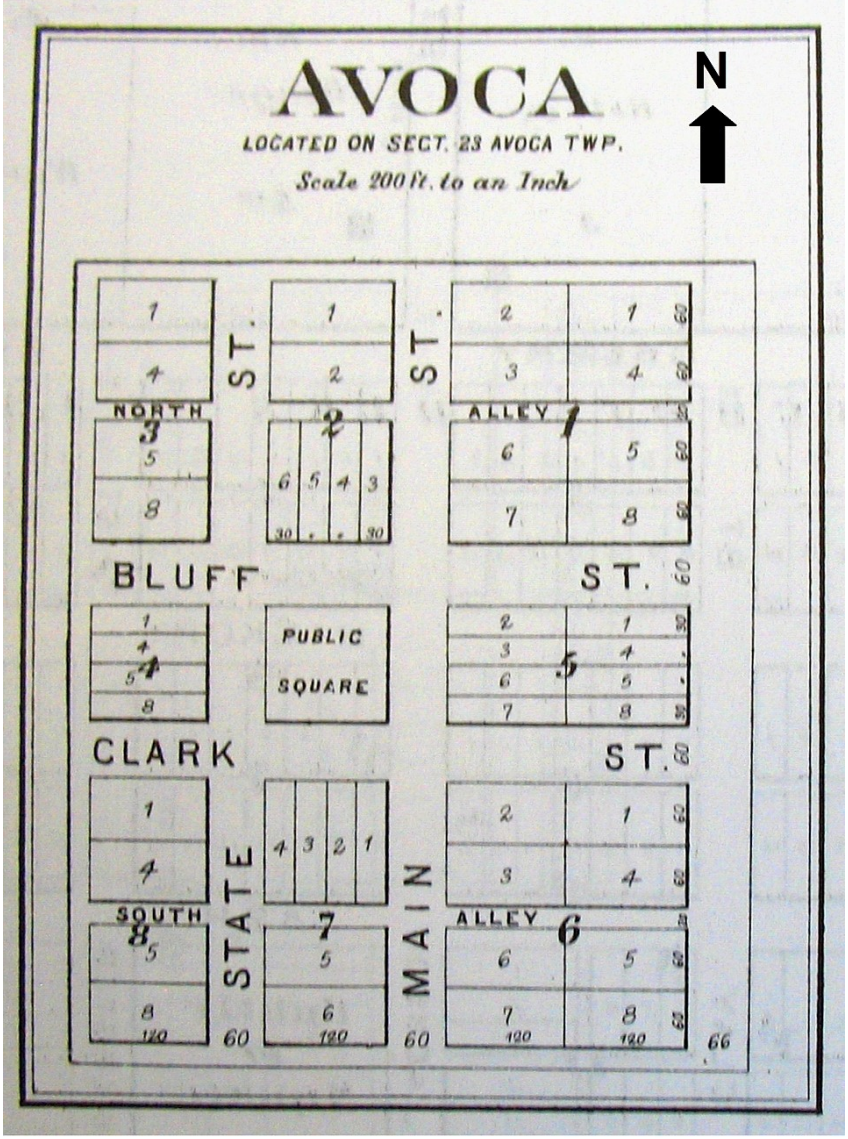
By the time the map of Avoca Township was made for the 1893 Atlas of Livingston County, First Street had been created. This street ran north from Fairbury and continued through a bridge at the Vermilion River. The road ran through the west border of the Village of Avoca.

The village of Avoca had a succession of three churches. The third church was built next to the Avoca Cemetery around 1905. The Fairbury carpenters who built this church were C. L. Mowry, W. L. Waggoner, G. B. Brownson, and James Smail.

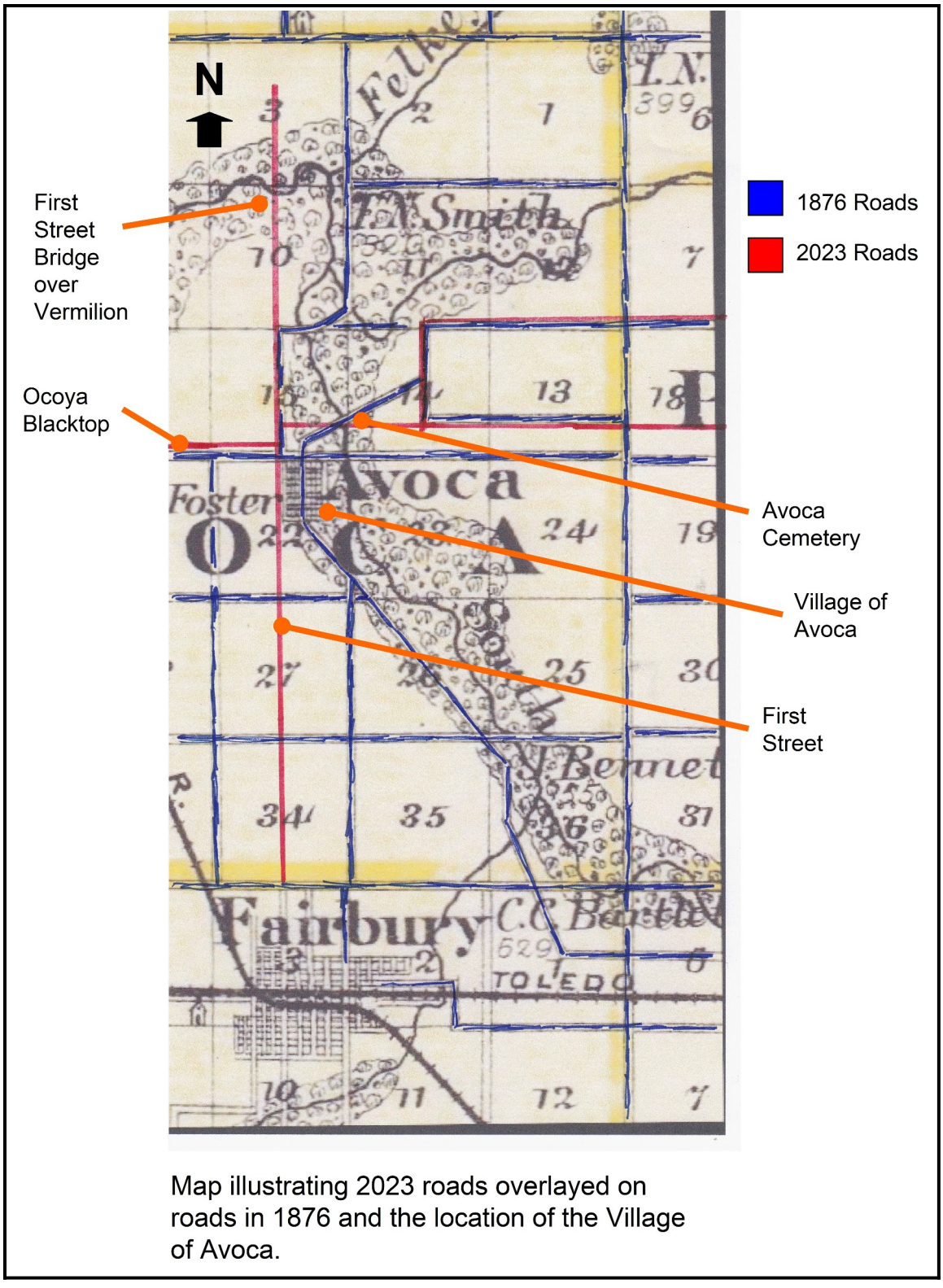
In 1935, the Blade reported the officers of the Illinois Methodist church voted to sell the Avoca church building to the East Bay Institute and East Bay Camp located on Lake Bloomington. This Bloomington organization had purchased several like buildings during the past few years. They moved them to Lake Bloomington, where the lumber was made over into other structures and used by various church denominations. When the churches or their organizations do not use these buildings, they are rented to other parties.

The wood from the demolished church was in fine condition. It was in such good shape and so well put together that it was cut into sections and hauled away on large motor trucks without tearing it apart. The siding and uprights were of white pine, remarkably free from knots and as bright looking as if they had just come from the mills.

After the last church was torn down in 1935, the only remaining significant remnant of the village of Avoca was the Avoca Cemetery. The site of the town reverted to agricultural farmland. Avoca Township still exists north of Fairbury. The Fairbury Echoes Museum has a Sunday School cloth banner from the Avoca village church that Bill & Cathryn Frisby donated.



Street map of village of Avoca from 1893 Atlas of Livingston County.



Map illustrating 2023 roads overlayed on roads in 1876 and the location of the Village of Avoca.